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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0695
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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 2874
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 1147
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC
RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: MORE OPEN STATE MEDIA REFLECT GOVERNMENT'S
RELAXING POLICIES

REF:: (A) ASHGABAT 220

- (B) ASHGABAT 491
- (C) ASHGABAT 466
- (D) ASHGABAT 734
- (E) ASHGABAT 716
- (F) ASHGABAT 851
- (G) ASHGABAT 1018
- (H) ASHGABAT 1083
- (I) ASHGABAT 1072

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: Post has observed steps towards a more open and informative state news media in Turkmenistan. Since the death of former President Niyazov, state media have slowly become more open to coverage of U.S. Government visitors and events in the country. Although it has not been an even, steady process, the subject matter has become broader, less strictly tied to glorification of the president or the state, and on occasion has even addressed difficult subject matter not previously discussed under Niyazov. In addition, post has observed a greater effort to provide accurate translations from interviews in English. Post highlights this progression, because, in a country where the state controls the media and reporting reflects policy priorities, these changes are a clear signal that the government of Turkmenistan is seeking to better inform its citizens about its foreign policy, including with the United States. END SUMMARY.

THE BASIC FRAMEWORK

13. (SBU) All domestic news media in Turkmenistan are controlled by the state. Until recent reforms under President Berdimuhamedov, news content was almost exclusively focused on the activities of the President, the great achievements of Turkmenistan in its "Golden Age," or the Ruhnama, the late President Niyazov's "book of the

soul." Similar coverage still dominates state media, but there are noticeable trends indicating a gradual move away from these habits. The new and more open content still appears to be largely determined or approved by high levels of the government. A review of coverage of Embassy programs and the steady flow of U.S. delegations provides insight into the evolving attitudes of state media.

¶4. (SBU) The openness and level of coverage of U.S. and other events has significantly grown in Turkmenistan state media to levels that would be difficult to imagine prior to the death of President Niyazov. The growing trend of a U.S.-friendly state media is a welcome and positive sign, even if it is not accompanied yet by greater freedom of speech or the start of independent news outlets. While state media still exhibit many of the same Niyazov-era and even Soviet-era habits, it is also coming closer to discussing problems and issues openly, including reporting on U.S. assistance. These trends could represent a controlled, gradual liberalization of the media as well as the country.

FEBRUARY: A BASELINE - COVERAGE SIMPLY DENIED

¶5. (SBU) Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher's visit to Turkmenistan for the inauguration of President Berdimuhamedov was covered in state media as one of many official international visitors for the occasion. However government authorities refused to cover A/S Boucher's visit to Turkmenabat following the inauguration and his speech focusing on education at the Pedagogical Institute there (reftel A).

THEN AN EVOLUTION BEGINS.....

¶6. (SBU) After the visit of A/S Boucher, state media began to cover new, but safe topics where there was no comparison with Turkmenistan. Television broadcasts focused on post's invited

ASHGABAT 00001108 002 OF 003

speakers on journalism and the U.S. civil rights movement as well as a visiting cultural group. While there was no comparison made to the situation in Turkmenistan, aspects of journalistic ethics, objectivity, and credibility were discussed in a short article reviewing Dr. Gregory Payne's meeting with state media representatives. Similarly, post's program for Dr. Elbert Ransom, a veteran of the civil rights movement, received broad, positive coverage, including information about the struggle for civil rights in the United States. Other U.S. programs and projects received favorable coverage as well, but within narrow limits that avoided mention of problems or controversy (reftel B). Significant broadcast and print coverage in state media was given to Native American dance group "Yellow Bird," which participated in the International Folklore and Drama Festival in April. Media highlighted compliments the performers had for Turkmenistan.

¶7. (SBU) However, despite the positive coverage of those U.S. speakers and groups, other, more sensitive U.S.-focused coverage was limited. For example, PAO's interview at a Democracy Commission grantee's photo exhibit was broadcast in full, but his comments about the Democracy Commission grants program or U.S. support for similar projects were simply not translated into Turkmen (or into other languages on TV4 which is broadcast in seven languages).

¶8. (SBU) In the case of ECA DAS Alina Romanowski's education delegation in early May, the Public Affairs Section (PAS) waged a lengthy campaign with state media contacts to convince them to cover key aspects of the delegation's visit, in particular a closing ceremony for a politically neutral, yet culturally significant Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP) project, which preserved an historic tower - an event visually suitable for any TV crew's tastes. The delegation's focus on education and culture was obviously compatible with the policies of President Berdimuhamedov, making coverage easier to achieve.

¶9. (SBU) The Romanowski coverage proved to be a major breakthrough for covering a visiting delegation which did not meet the president. For the first time, it also covered U.S. official visitors outside the capital city. Without using the word "assistance," it was clear from the reporting that the United States had provided funding to

preserve this AFCP site that is important for local ancestral worship traditions.

BETTER ACCURACY, COMING CLOSER TO THE "WHOLE STORY"

¶10. (SBU) Since June, post has noted better accuracy in reporting and efforts to cover the "whole story" pertaining to U.S. events and visitors. DAS Feigenbaum's comments, during his June visit, about cooperation in all fields, including democracy and human rights, were covered with accurate translation. In addition, an interview with the PAO at the opening of a U.S. jazz program included the context of improved U.S.-Turkmenistan relations and a paraphrasing of DAS Feigenbaum's comments on democracy and human rights. This was covered in full on state TV, and with accurate Turkmen translation. Mirroring improving relations, starting with the visit of PDAS Steven Mann in July, state media, on its own initiative and without any prompting from the Public Affairs Section, provided positive coverage of U.S. delegations.

¶11. (SBU) The biggest change in coverage occurred with the opening of the Imamnazar border checkpoint. On August 10, state "Watan" TV news program announced the upcoming opening of the checkpoint on August 13 and noted the attendance of Assistant Secretary of State for Economic, Energy and Business Affairs, Daniel Sullivan. The announcement described the checkpoint's modern facilities, noted that it was a symbol of partnership between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, but did not mention the U.S. Government's role as principal donor for the project. Following the border opening, State "Watan" TV news program's August 13 and August 14 broadcasts gave extensive coverage, praising the project and highlighting the

ASHGABAT 00001108 003 OF 003

support of the U.S. Government and the UN. Video showed the ceremony including all U.S. Government speakers, along with A/S Sullivan, and other foreign and local officials touring the facility. Since then, coverage has generally been extensive, with only slightly lower coverage when President Berdimuhamedov was in New York. Nevertheless, even though he was away from the country, he reportedly ordered that a story be done on the Ashgabat International School, the school that U.S. Embassy dependents attend.

SLOW LIBERALIZING TREND; POSITIVE VIEW OF U.S.

¶12. (SBU) By government policy, state media are still tightly controlled. However, authorities have allowed increasingly favorable, extensive, and accurate coverage of U.S. delegations and events. This appears to indicate Turkmenistan is increasingly comfortable with its new engagement with the United States - concrete evidence that both countries are "turning the page" in the bilateral relationship.

HOAGLAND